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SITUATIONS AND PROBLEMS OF OLDER RURAL YOUTH

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Most of our studies of rural youth in recent years have concerned themselves with what rural youth think and want. This is important, but I am not going to spend much time discussing the data developed in numerous studies in that field. Other studies have thoroughly analyzed the ratio of rural youth to the remainder of the rural population and the ratio of rural youth to the total youth of the Nation. I shall use the results of these studies, but shall make only such use of the statistics developed in them as will set the task of wrestling with the problems which these statistics reveal.

From almost every angle youth are the most important issue in American agriculture, first, because they are the greatest concern of farmers and their wives; second, because there are so many of them; and third, because we don't know what to do about them or for them. We are worried about agricultural surpluses, but our greatest surplus is rural youth. My whole text is stated in those first two sentences, and I shall spend the remainder of my time in expounding that text.

It seems to me that the first basic fact we must recognize in an attempt to think through programs of action for farm youth is that the problems of those now living on farms who will later leave their farm homes and spend the remainder of their lives in towns and cities, working in occupations other than agriculture are just as important to their parents and to our society as those who will remain in agriculture.

If we consider only those youths between 15 and 25 years of age, there are probably about 7,000,000 living on farms today. The 1940 Census returns aren't tabulated yet by age groups, but we know pretty well that fewer young persons have migrated from farms and cities since 1929 than were migrating up to that time, and we know what percentage of the total farm population was in this age group in 1929. Our two best population experts in the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, Drs. Conrad Taeuber and O. E. Baker, furnished me the figure I just used. If they are right, let me repeat the figure, there are approximately 7,000,000 boys and girls between the ages of 15 and 25 on American farms today. They are at the time of



life when they are trying to get started into some occupation or profession, expecting to get married, or thinking about these things. Many of them have already taken the leap into one or both of these enterprises and are in the process of adjustment or maladjustment.

The answer to the question of where these youth are reveals some real issues or problems. In the first place, of course, they are on the farm, most of them in their parents' homes. According to the best estimates, about 80 percent of the farm boys and about 62 percent of the farm girls between the ages of 15 and 25 were still in their parents' homes in 1935. This is about 25 percent more than were in their parents' homes in 1930. Probably the most significant fact is that there are approximately 1,167,000 of them who would not be in the farm population at all if industrial and commercial opportunities had been relatively as inviting in the last decade as they were in the twenties.

Two other important facts are: first, there are just about twice as many youth in the farm population as are needed for replacement in agriculture; and second, they are in greater surpluses in areas of low agricultural opportunity than they are in areas of relatively favorable agricultural opportunity. If industrial employment should pick up due to the defense program, to the extent that is now predicted, nonagricultural employment will absorb about 4,000,000 on the average for about the next five years. Approximately another 1,000,000 will be in the army each year. Thus, about 5,000,000 persons would be engaged in activities not now available to them. We, however, have apparently a minimum of 8,000,000 unemployed, and about 1,500,000 additional employables will be added to the population during the next five years. It cannot, therefore, be assumed that our unemployment problem either on the farms or in towns or cities will be completely eliminated within the immediate future.

If in addition to the farm operators who will die in the next 20 years, every farmer who reaches 65 years of age would retire, the farms they would vacate would make room for about 2,700,000 beginning farmers. During the same 20 years 6,000,000 boys now living on American farms will have reached 20 years of age. If they all try to enter farming, there will be 225 young men competing for every 100 farms available. We, of course, know that not all of them will want to or try to enter farming, that some persons now in agriculture will leave for other occupations and professions. But we also know that all farmers won't retire at the age of 65, and we know that there are persons leaving towns and cities every year seeking to enter agriculture.

In the areas of low economic opportunity, the picture is still darker. If we apply these same calculations to southern, or cotton belt States, we will see that there will be 300 applicants or competitors for every 100 farms. If we apply them to the Southern Appalachian mountain area, there will be about 350 for every 100 farms. Even if we apply them to Iowa, we estimate there will be 180 competitors for every 100 farms.

Farm youth who are in great surplus on farms, farm boys and girls who, had it not been for the depression, would have already migrated to industrial and commercial centers, who by the thousands are not needed on farms, should get their share of the defense industrial jobs. Many of the jobs are and will be technical, skilled jobs. This means that farm youth must be trained to perform



them. Schools and work shops should be set up at once and farm youth by the thousands should be completely financed while they learn the skills required. The schools and the industries themselves should, wherever possible, be located near these pools of surplus farm youth.

Such training would be only partially emergency, for during its progress many farm youth would learn skills which would equip them for successful employment all through life. If such a program is followed, and I have no doubt it will be, from it we may expect to gain the conviction that our vocational high schools should continue the program of training after the emergency is past.

I want to deal now with the two great bodies of rural youth whose situations will constitute our outstanding problems for a long while to come. To restate the basic facts: during the next 20 years, that is, between 1940 and 1960, 6,000,000 boys now living on American farms will reach 20 years of age. If agricultural opportunities remain about as they are now, 45 percent, or 2,700,000 of them, will be needed to replace older farmers who have died or retired during the next 20 years. The other 55 percent, or 3,300,000 will be seeking opportunities in other occupations and professions. These facts tell us that we need to give serious consideration to two very different groups, the 2,700,000 who will remain in agriculture, and the 3,300,000 who will leave the farm. These numbers must be doubled if farm girls as well as boys are considered. I shall discuss first those who will leave the farm and in doing so, speak chiefly about training them for effective employment in nonfarm occupations and professions.

We have for twenty-three years had a nationwide vocational education program to train farm boys and girls for successful farming and homemaking. A number of States had such a program before the Smith-Hughes law was passed. A number of cities have technical high schools, and both rural and urban schools have developed manual training or shop courses. We are just now, however, going to spend \$10,000,000 in an attempt to train thousands of persons to fill the demand for skilled workmen for the defense industries. There has been a shortage of skilled workers for a number of years. Our vocational education program has not only been inadequate from the standpoint of our youth, but also from the standpoint of our industries. This fact seems to me to furnish sufficient suggestion for what I am going to say about training farm boys for nonfarm occupations.

This training should be furnished in both rural and urban centers. The rural high schools should offer such training because they are the schools located in the communities where rural youth live and are the schools supported with the taxes which rural youths' parents pay to train their sons and daughters. Something like one-half of the vocational education program in rural high schools should be given over to training for occupations other than farming. The program should be in consolidated rural schools, and in small town high schools. Small cities located at places where each school center could serve a total urban-rural population of something like 50,000 should have technical schools providing definite training for skilled and semi-skilled professions. Training in these schools should be not only at the high school level but below that level also. In such schools, tuition should be free for farm youth as well as city youth. If these programs of training in established schools and these new types of schools don't fit into our present tax-supported districts, then a provision should be made for a realignment of districts or the establishment of overlying districts which will make the program feasible.



It would seem to me that the program should go even further. Large cities should, for their own sake, provide elaborate apprenticeship training institutions for the sole purpose of training older youth and adult rural migrants for urban jobs. Others, of course, could also enter these schools, but I am thinking primarily of the service such schools would render during the next 20 years to that great mass of persons, of about 6,600,000 boys and girls who, while now on farms, will spend their adult and working days in nonfarm occupations and professions.

Inequality of educational opportunities for different areas of the Nation has definite bearing on the problem of training youth for urban as well as rural occupation. In orientation to this problem, these inequalities are: First, that the rural areas of the Nation have more than their share of the Nation's children, but far less than their share of the Nation's school funds; Second, the poorest rural areas in terms of tax bases have more children than the richer areas; Third, these poorer areas furnish more migrants to towns and cities than any other areas of the Nation; Fourth, as a result, migrants to towns and cities are drawn heavily from the very areas which, because of lack of school funds, haven't trained them for economic success in urban occupations and city life.

Here are some typical facts to substantiate the statements just made: First, the farm population is less than 25 percent of the national population, but it contains more than 30 percent of the Nation's children under 15 years of age. In 1930, there were 675 children (5 to 17 years of age) per 1,000 adults (20 to 64 years of age) in the farm population, but only 348 per 1,000 adults in the large urban centers.\*

Second, the farm population, responsible for the care and education of 30 percent of the Nation's children, received only 9 percent of the national income in 1930, and the greatest numbers of children per adult population were in States that had the lowest tax base with which to support schools. There were, in 1935-36 nine States which, had they expended "normal tax effort" would have had revenue available per child of less than \$30. The State of Arkansas which expended the least per child of any State, namely \$15.81, would have had available under "normal tax effort" only \$15.20 per child. This so-called "normal tax effort" is a ratio of taxes to the taxpaying capacity of the people, a ratio which, if applied to the United States as a whole, would yield \$51.77 per child. It would yield more than \$125 per child in 4 States and would yield more than the national average of \$51.77 in 16 States.\*\*

The thing I am trying to say is something that the President's Advisory Committee on Education made very clear, namely, that the lack of educational opportunity for children in the poorer States is not due to an unwillingness on the part of the citizens of these States to tax themselves for the support of

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\* Advisory Committee on Education, Report of the Committee, Govt. Printing Office, Washington, D. C., February, 1938, p. 25.

\*\* Advisory Committee on Education, Op. Cit. Tables 1 & 2, pp. 225-6.



schools. Let me state a few contrasts to make this point very clear. If the people of New York State were to use "normal tax effort," they would have available \$129.60 per child per year for school funds, whereas Arkansas by the same effort would have only \$15.20 per child. The District of Columbia would have \$177.13 per child and Alabama would have \$13.38; Delaware would have \$147.85 and South Carolina would have \$13.30. Of the 33 States which, by expending normal tax effort, would have less revenue than the national average, 22 taxed themselves heavier in order to support inadequate schools than did the 16 States of the Union which expended more than the national average.

Third, of the 10 States now most able to support education, 7 are not rearing children in numbers large enough to maintain their populations without replacement from other areas. The other areas that furnish children for these replacements are for the most part the poor agricultural areas of the Nation, where the schools are inadequate.

Fourth, not only are the schools in rural areas inadequate, but thousands of farm youth are not in school, and a very small percentage of them are receiving vocational education which will equip them for urban occupations when and if they migrate to cities. In the States of Arizona, New Mexico, Louisiana, South Carolina, Alabama, and Mississippi, more than 10 percent of all farm youth 15 to 24 years of age were illiterate in 1930. In that same year, less than 40 percent of all farm youth 16 and 17 years of age were in schools in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Maryland.\* There are about half as many youth of high school age as elementary school age and yet there were in 1935-36 only 6 States with high school enrollment over 40 percent of the elementary school enrollment, and there were 8 States with less than 20 percent.\*\* All of these 8 States are dominantly rural and are among the States which are furnishing a great flow of migrants to urban centers. A recent study in Arkansas shows that "115 open-country districts containing 80 percent of the farm population of Washington County enrolled in high school only 11 percent of potential enrollment. The 14 districts containing a village or town and having a 4-year high school enrolled more than 60 percent.... Twenty-five of the open-country districts without high school facilities had, during the ten year period (1927-37), a potential high school enrollment of 2,500 pupils, but during this period not one child from these districts attended high school."\*\*\* Arkansas contributed 16,500 migrants from her farms to towns and cities between 1930 and 1935, and Washington County lost nearly 50 percent of her natural increase in population by migration to other areas between 1930 and 1940.

The first and most fundamental problem within agriculture itself is how to create more constructive and creative opportunities for youth on American farms. We are unrealistic if we do not recognize this as a necessary task. We have believed for the last twenty years that this was neither necessary nor desirable;

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\* Melvin & Smith, Rural Youth: Their Situation and Prospects, WPA 1938, pp. 47-48.

\*\* Advisory Committee on Education, Op. Cit., p. 13.

\*\*\* Charlton, J. L., School Services in Rural Communities in Washington County, Bull. No. 398, Agr. Expt. Sta., Univ. of Ark., Fayetteville, Ark., June 1940, pp. 41-42.



we have believed that the greater the number who left farms for towns and cities the greater would be the share of the total farm income for those who remained in farming, but it hasn't worked out that way during the last ten years. Those in the cities haven't had buying power enough to create increasing demand for farm products and many of those who left farms and went to towns and cities haven't found jobs. This trend will probably be reversed with increasing opportunities for employment, but it probably won't be permanent unless we have a very rapidly falling birth rate in cities. We can foresee the possibility of something like 330,000 people leaving the farm each year for the next twenty years, and that is what would have to happen if the surplus youth above replacement needs are to move out of farming. But we cannot foresee the possibility of our farms being reduced to 5,182,000 and the farm population to 24,202,200, the numbers which Dr. O. V. Wells estimates would be necessary if we were to assume "that farming generally should be conducted on the same scale and farmers should have the same individual or family income as that which prevails in the Corn Belt, our most prosperous farm section."\*

No. We are not realistically planning to help rural youth by the assumption that there will be very many fewer on farms during the next decade or two. We had therefore better give serious thought to the task of providing opportunities for a greater number of people on farms. This will be no easy task. It will undoubtedly require two things: first, more farms per productive acres; and second, the development of a different standard of living than is now our aspiration in the better farming areas of the Nation. I do not say a lower standard of living, but a different standard of living.

If family-sized farms were the universal rule, if the maximum production for home use were practiced in all farming areas of the Nation, and if we could develop a body of living values and techniques as creative and self-sustaining as possible, we could support a greater number of people on our farms and yet neither break the market for farm products nor lower the standard of living of farm youth.

The development of family-sized farms cannot be done ruthlessly or by fiat, but the trend can and will be turned in that direction when we make up our minds that it must be done. Factors encouraging the opposite development are extreme commercialization, mechanization, and certain credit practices, all of which spell out into the theory and philosophy that farming is and should be primarily a profit-making enterprise. This is all right within limits, for farmers should and must make profits. It is not all right when it goes to the extremes of giving no consideration, or little consideration, to whether the farms are owned by corporations and other absentee owners, to whether their operation requires a great mass of seasonal migratory laborers, and no consideration to the fact that operating farms solely by the criterion of greatest money-making units completely disregards the fact that we are steadily developing millions of landless people in the farm population. If there are to be 12,000,000 farm boys and girls coming to 20 years of age between now and 1960 and even one-half of them are to find their occupational outlook in agriculture, then some way must be found by which opportunities in farming can be more widely spread among those who want to farm.

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\* Wells, O. V., "How Many Farmers Do We Require?" Land Policy Review, Sept. 1940, p. 3.



There are some things that can be done; I would list them as follows:

(1) Continued and expanded assistance toward farm ownership to those farm youths seeking to enter agriculture; (2) Assistance to young farm couples to relocate from areas of low economic opportunity to newly developing areas such as the Grand Coulee reclamation area and others; (3) Homestead tax exemptions; (4) The development of numerous small-scale neighborhood cooperatives through which the utilization of mechanization and mass merchandising can be brought to individual small farm operators; (5) The development and encouragement of the decentralization of a great many industries in order that part-time farming, which is already very prevalent but often uneconomical, may be made an acceptable outlook for thousands of farm families.

The second suggestion I have to make by way of a program or programs for helping to solve the problem of those youth who want to remain in agriculture is very difficult, and in fact treacherous, with which to deal because it sounds as though I am arguing for a lowering of the level of farm family living. That this is not true can be made clear only by a discussion of the difference between a level of living and a standard of living. A level of living is only a rung on the ladder by means of which an individual, a family, or a group of people, climbs toward the attainment of its standard of living. A standard of living consists of the things people want, the things they want to do, and the things they enjoy having and doing. With the exception, therefore, of those things necessary to health and decency, a level of living for any group of people should always be measured in terms of its standard of living. When I said, therefore, that we need the development of a different standard of living, I was not advocating that farm people lower their standard of living. As a matter of fact, I am quite convinced that they can raise their standard of living and still go without some things which many people would prescribe as essential to their level of living. I am furthermore afraid that unless some such thing is accomplished, they will be faced with the necessity of lowering both their standard and level of living, and if this is in prospect, then we had better frankly face alternative possibilities.

The first step among alternative possibilities is the development of programs everywhere in American farming for the maximum production for home use. This does not mean that we should destine great segments of the farm population to mere subsistence farming. It means that hundreds of thousands of farm families could raise their level of living by producing more of the products they need for consumption, that they would thereby be able to use their income from commercial farming to purchase other elements in their level of living, and that the market for farm products could be divided among a greater number of farms. To the extent that such a development would work in the direction I have just indicated, it would contribute to the raising of the farm family level of living and at the same time create opportunities for a greater number of families on the land. Both of these things are of tremendous importance to those youth who look forward to living on farms.

The sole contribution of live-at-home or security farming is not, however, merely the increased amount of food made available to the farm family, nor is it confined solely to the physical elements in the level or standard of living. Housing, clothing, and health are elements in the level of living which can be enhanced by individual effort, but the primary elements in remaking rural culture, or creating different standards of living, are education, recreation, religion, and participation in creative social contacts. These are the very elements which are sacrificed first in a commercialized agriculture when it does not yield adequate profits with which to purchase them. It is fortunate that they are things



that can be created by the people themselves and need not be purchased. In the creating of them, the desire for them, and the process of obtaining them inhere the techniques by which we can remake our standards of living. It is not, and will not be an easy undertaking in an age and society in which people have become accustomed to purchasing rather than creating their art and recreation and in which they have largely lost their local neighborhood and community life.

But it is my conviction that we shall not regain the economic security of the past, much less the social and psychological security, without regaining a considerable degree of our self-sufficient farming. We can do this without the sacrifice of mechanization and commercialization, and it is my guess that we are now buying from the market some things which we can produce more cheaply on our own farms and in our own homes. In wide areas of cash crop production, many things are left out of the standard of living which could be had if it were the habit of the people to produce them on their own farms and in their own homes. Furthermore, no one can even conceive of such widespread development of farm tenancy and migratory labor except as a corollary of a supercommercialized farming.

The task therefore of those who would recover the creative values and zestful participation in rural life is to discover and promote ways and means of building folk culture back into it, not wholly on foundations that have partially collapsed, but on the basis of both old and new foundations. Let farmers produce for the market, but teach them and their families to produce also for home consumption. Include in their home production objects of art and beauty in the making of which they can become just as apt and can have just as much creative experience and zest as anyone else. Let them have electric lights, running water, and other household conveniences in their homes, but help them to recover and rebuild their love for the beautiful and the simple. Let them mechanize their farms and reduce their hours of labor, but help them to utilize the leisure created thereby in reading good books, singing great oratorios, acting, and even writing drama, and in all other kinds of recreation. Help them to know that personal, human association with family, friends, and neighbors is to be cherished equally with all the numerous impersonal, more or less transient contacts of the outside world combined.

These things will not grow as fruits from seeds of economic endeavor alone. They will not come solely from the application of physical science and mechanization. They have seeds and life processes of their own, and these seeds must be planted and these life processes nurtured and cultivated. This is a detailed, everyday, and everlasting process and the only process by which we will restore a balanced culture in rural life.

If I were to attempt to state in a very few sentences the essence of everything I have tried to say here, it would be that(not more than one-half of the youth now living on American farms will find promising opportunity in agriculture during the next twenty years; that they must have industrial opening in order to prepare themselves for jobs off the farm; that nonfarm people and nonfarm enterprises must help to support such training; and that within agriculture itself, more attention must be given to all types of non-profit activities which will enhance the standards of living of farm people and thus create more favorable opportunities for those youth who desire to farm and who should be permitted to do so. Unless militant, consistent, and persistent attacks are made on both the rural and urban fronts, in terms of specific programs of the type discussed here, the outlook for rural youth will continue to be dark. )